

Episode #27

Pressure on top of pressure in Haiti

Naomi Docilait

We've heard over and over again. And sometimes people may not understand why a farmer needs to get creative outside of the norm of just farming. Because [of] the realities of climate change is, I can no longer depend on just the farm

Christy Narration:

That was Naomi Docilait, the MCC program director in Haiti. In this episode we hear about how our partners in Haiti are feeling the impact of climate change. But as with many vulnerable populations that are affected by these weather changes, that isn't the only pressure they are facing.

I'm producer Christy Kauffman and today I'll be your host. You are listening to Relief Development and Podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

Intro music

In Haiti, often times when you are making a plan with a friend or a plan of any kind it is very common to end that conversation with "Si bondye vle". The creole phrase meaning "lord willing". It's so common in Haiti because there is a very real and practical understanding that things often don't go as planned. It's a recognition of lack of control. In this context that means the insecurity in recent years caused by an increase in gang violence and political instability, the sudden natural disasters that Haiti has seen all too often, and the unpredictability of the rain. These are all pressures one on top of the other, each one adding more weight on a vulnerable population.

In March I had the opportunity to visit Haiti, I went with MCC's local staff to visit partners and hear about the realities they're facing. I also got a chance to talk with Rony Janvier the current MCC representative for Haiti and Naomi Docilait, MCC's program director in Haiti. That's the conversation you'll hear today.

So I would like to know a little bit of like, what is the current day-to-day in Haiti? What are the different pressures that people are feeling in Haiti.

Rony Janvier

Now, the current day to day, pressure is about the insecurity, the kidnapping cases, which is which are increasing day after day.

Naomi Docilait

So unfortunately, Haiti has continued to remain in a constant state of uncertainty. As much planning as people try to do here in the country, it's very difficult because you never know what's planned for tomorrow, children aren't able to go to school because of this. Sometimes,

schools have to shut down for the safety of the kids. If a zone is experiencing a lot of hostile situation, we have to shut down schools, banks, offices. And this continues to be the everyday reality here. Though there has been many protests, though there has been many attempts at getting a response from the government that continues to be a challenge. But yet, the Haitian people have continued to try to move forward despite this difficult situation, they've tried to live a life of normalcy in the chaos, meaning they still try to do their everyday activities of going to work bringing their children to school, going to church

Naomi Dociliat

So as we, those who work here in Haiti, we've noticed this through our partners, as well, as we're trying to plan program visits, as we're trying to assess the progress that partners are making with projects. As you're reading some of the reports, it's clearly noted that these challenges are affecting the work on the ground. But at the same time, they're also noting alternatives that have been created to continue moving forward with the work. And that's what continues to give us hope. Because we know that as long as people are still trying to think outside of the box, despite this difficult situation for us, who are here to support them that continues to give us hope for the work that we do. Because we understand it's a very difficult context that is doesn't seem to be changing in the manner that we would like it. And at times, we can feel hopeless. But as we talk to partners, we call them we have visits with them. Whether it's face to face or online communication, we're able to strategize together to see how the work can move forward.

Rony Janvier

In Haiti we were facing insecurity, like 10 years ago, 15 years ago. But now what we are experiencing, it's really totally different. If I had a friend of mine who was kidnapped, and when he explained to me what what the situation is, it was really very hard to hear. And my friend is now about to leave the country. Now, even for a short period of time, you want to leave, like to breathe, and to find energy. And to restart for now.

Christy Kauffman

That's a huge weight on people's shoulders right now, you can feel it, all the planning that needs to happen, you can feel that pressure that people are feeling. But how have you seen on your agricultural partners, how they're affected with the changing climate? I know that disproportionately affects different communities that are already vulnerable, how have you guys seen that and the partners that you're working with?

Naomi Dociliat

for a lot of the partners, it's the drought that has really affected them, because for example, right now we should be entering a rain season. And farmers are already complaining about how there's a lack of rain. So that's part of the climate changes. When you're expecting rains, you have longer periods of droughts, which is affecting the yields in their farms, which is then affecting what they can put on the market or what they can feed their families with. So that has been the biggest complaint.

And that also affects the type of crops that they grow. If they know they're going to be long periods of drought, they no longer can grow crops that require a lot of water. So farmers in certain areas are starting to change the crops that they're growing, so they can have drought resistant crops growing. So those are some of the shifts that I've noticed, with the farmers when you're talking to them and you're listening to their realities of how when they're planting some of these inputs, that they're not getting the yields that they expected, which is going to affect them, because one of the strategies these farmer associations are trying to use this, storing seeds for like beans. And that's not possible if you're not having a good yield. Because then you have to use all of it, you're not able to store it. Because for one of the projects we had, that was a priority to store as much of what you were able to grow in your garden for the next farming season. So, if that's not able to be realized, then we have to reassess that portion of the program to see what is possible within the current reality. So, this means reevaluating projects every year to see, is it feasible to meet some of these outputs? Is it feasible to reach your long-term objectives? If at the activities you're having hinderances. So, these are some of the talks we're having with program coordinators, with directors to see what the feedback they're getting from the farmers and how we can adjust it as partners working alongside them to reach their long-term goals.

Rony Janvier 9:52

Yeah, and I can add like, the communities are, really depend on the rain and when the rainy season changes, either to come before or after that, as Naomi mentioned that affects the crop in the, the program plan as well. With climate change we don't really know when it's best to plan or not. And now you know what, or what we can do just to adapt with the change, the climate change adapt with the the types of crop they are, there are planting . And yeah, in as well. In some communities, they don't really have access to water, even water in the community to like to get water closely to water, the gardens and they are demanding as well for projects, water water projects in those community as well. In order to, if it doesn't rain or if it takes time to get the rain so that they could have an alternative to continue to water in our gardens.

| *Sounds of singing in Haitian Creole and motorcycles

Christy Narration:

That was the sound of an average Thursday Night in Dezam Haiti. A familiar song from the church service down the street, a neighbors gini hens, a moto passing by. Dezam is where MCC agricultural partner Konbit Peyizan works, and after I visited I wanted to talk with Rony and Naomi more about that challenges we saw there.

Christy Kauffman 12:35

Yeah, I was just in Konbit Peyizan. And it had rained in the valley in Dezam and the night before I went to Kabay, which is a smaller community up in the mountains. And that community didn't see any rain even though it was like a 20 minute moto ride away.

Rony Janvier 12:59

Yeah, a couple of weeks we were in Dezam for our midterm evaluation. And that was one of the biggest challenge those communities are facing, especially Kabay. Anyone you talk with asks for water. If Konbit can come with, with a project of water, if they can build cisterns, or if they can do a water catchment project because they don't have access to water. Neither the rain, and they can't store the rain as well, they can't. They can't and they don't have rain, like, yeah, the rainy season is not regular and as well they don't have a water catchment

Christy Kauffman 13:52

And I've noticed Haitians have this way of saying they tied up the rain. Yeah. What does it mean to tie up the rain? What do people mean when they say they say that?

Rony Janvier

Say that again?

Naomi Dociliat 14:05

Mari Lapli? their belief is that someone is holding the rain hostage.

Christy Narration:

Christy here jumping in to explain that. Mari lapli, is a traditional voodoo belief that people have the capabilities of literally holding or tying up the rain to prevent others from receiving it. So some of the important climate conversations in Haiti right now are just defining what climate change is and how the weather patterns have changed over the years instead of escribing those changes to the voodoo practices. Now back to our conversation...

Naomi Dociliat 14:29

Yeah, that's a belief that's gonna take some work to overcome. Because they really believe that it's a human. Of course, climate change has come from us tampering with certain things but they really believe that someone holding, literally holding the rain from falling. Easier said than done.

Christy Kauffman 14:53

In a way like climate change is looked at as an effect from people. People are kind of holding the rain, in a way.

Naomi Dociliat 15:02

That's why I mentioned earlier, we have contributed to this climate change. So, I understand that.

Christy Kauffman 15:08

Yeah, what are the different projects doing to help people adapt to this?

Naomi Dociliat 15:13

To the realities? I know reforestation is one of the works, that Konbit Peyizan s very good at doing. And we've done a World Environment Day where we visited some of these sites to see

the progress made. And then we planted new trees. Some other things we're trying to do at a smaller level is working with farmers to apply different techniques in their gardens, that when it does rain, we're able to hold the water, so it doesn't run off the land, which would be your conservation techniques. So that's part of almost every agricultural project. I think, actually, all agricultural products that we have, is that the agronomist are teaching the farmers, this conservation, conservation techniques of how to use them in their garden. So that way, though, they're facing these difficult realities, that the training that they do have, they can apply it to their gardens to get as much as possible from the land, despite some of these challenges, and then you're always educating them on teaming up together doing as we call konbits working together to work in each other's gardens. So that way, as they're working together, they're able to turn around the gardens faster, which also can help them to counteract some of these challenges.

Rony Janvier 16:41

As well, we encourage them to plant crops that can adapt the environment as well. As Naomi said, that the techniques we, they are training on, help them to adapt with that and to understand as well, the, the reality, the climate change, and why they need to have to change their behavior, and why they need to adapt. To change attitudes, it takes time. Because culturally, people think what they used to do in the past, it's the best way to continue. In one of our disaster response project in the south, we don't have reforestation project, but we have a nursery a components inside and that is, as well a way to contribute to help with the climate change, because they will, the participant will have seeds to plant and, they will. Like it's it will be like a reforestation project, even though if it is not like under the title, you know, there will be food seeds, seeds, and forest as well seeds in that, in that in that project. Those are those are what we do, and to help our participant, our program, sustain and to adapt with climate change.

Naomi Dociliat 18:54

And we're always assessing their knowledge, attitudes and practices, which we call the "KAP", trying to as we're educating them to see if they're actually retaining what we're teaching them with these agricultural topics and these nutrition topics and these hygiene topics, because we know what all can contribute to their well-being. So, we're always trying to see what needs to be changed, adapting to what's the current reality on the ground. If it's hurricane season, which is one of our projects we did with one of the partners in the south when the hurricane hit in 2016, is reestablishing some of these gardens that were washed away. So, we're just assessing to see what current disaster, what reality they're facing. And then we try to teach them what's necessary so they can re-establish themselves if they lost all their income, which is what we're doing with one of the women's project is trying to reestablish their income by providing some inputs for them. So, it just depends what what's the current reality and how we can address those current realities as we brainstorm together to try to move forward with them, because we're always trying to see what's going on? And how can we contribute to what the partner is already doing on the ground, listening to their ideas, and accompanying them to actually accomplish what they already envisioned for themselves.

Well, a lot of the partners, because they've experienced a lot of loss in terms of their livelihoods, meaning, whether it's their farms, their animals, their homes, or even their their small businesses, because a lot of them resell some of the produce that that they're growing.

Christy Narration

The loss that Naomi mentions here comes from many of the pressures we're talking about. There was earthquake that happened last year, that added pressure. Hurricanes that hit the south of the island in the years past, and the ongoing climate struggles. There's multiple layers to this and it's all topped off with an increased difficulty to get to the south because of the insecurities. Its not only an earthquake response for MCC and its partners in the south.

Naomi Dociliat

If you're able to support them to put their garden back to functioning capacity, then they're able to tell us, and we've seen this when we visited AVORDES one of our partners in the south, the beautiful tomatoes that the one young lady was able to grow throughout her gardens, and she was very proud to display it and show us and explain to us, this is how she's been able to help herself and her family is through selling of these tomatoes. And another project was providing them with animals that they've lost, and seeing the children that the goats, the little children that's already been born, you know, like, oh, wow, within a year, you already had this many goats, they're multiplying, they're able to use it, and they need to sell it to pay for their children's school fees, or if they have an emergency, those animals are the asset that they use. So they're able to support any emergency that they have. So to us, it might be something so menial as one goat What can one goat do, but when you're listening to the stories, when you're on the ground, when you're visiting the homes of these families, you're like, Okay. And then they were sharing once they had a little baby, they were sharing it to each other, to their neighbors who didn't get a goat from the project. That was inspiring as well. So, it's just good to see how the community gets together to think on the behalf of others around them, not just for themselves. So it's even enriching the community by allowing them to think together to help each other, which they probably would not have done had there not been a support there to provide some of these inputs.

Christy Kauffman

What is the importance of like, after disaster, looking at ways to increase livelihoods and not just an immediate response?

Naomi Dociliat

Of course, everything comes in phases, we are aware that you have to meet someone's immediate needs before you can move to the next level, which is what we did with the material resource, and I'll let Rony talk about that.

Rony Janvier

Yeah but before we talk about the material resources, it was the need, it was the request from the community not to just give food, okay? But to continue with what we've been doing in this

community as well. Doing our Rapid Needs Assessment and people, everybody, like we can say hundreds of percent of people demanding to continue with agricultural work, with livelihoods work. What we've been doing for years in the community. They didn't ask, they didn't request food. Yet food was a need for them. When we said, why don't you ask for food? They said, yes, we need food now. But we need something that, like to continue on because you won't be there month after month or day after day to give food in the community. We saw in a very good example in this committee in terms of sustainability the way they think in like this for future.

Naomi Dociliat

Because what tends to happen is they're well aware that people will help with the immediate. And then less people are there for the long term. After six months, after one year, they're still in need. But there's less people helping because they're, most people are just there to help with the immediate, a lot of people are there to help with the immediate. So their request to us was, what can you do past the immediate to help us when everyone else leaves? And that's where the Rapid Assessment came in to assess what was noted on the ground and how we can develop projects that goes for beyond the six months to a year, two years, if possible to help these people in terms of long-term support.

Christy Kauffman

What is something that you would want people outside of Haiti to know about how climate change is affecting people here?

Naomi Dociliat

For me, what I'd like people to know is that just providing more inputs, or just giving the people food is not the solution. A lot of the farmers want to continue to work and generate income from what they're doing. So that's why when we speak to them in these surveys through these evaluations, they ask can we provide inputs in terms of income-generating activities? Because they're well aware of the realities with the climate change and how they're having difficulties getting a harvest that they would like, so therefore, they're getting creative, as to other ways to supplement some of these activities, they're farming activities. So, they've created other avenues for generating income. And that's what they've asked for support for now is a lot of support towards these income generating activities, as we're still confronting some of these realities with the climate change in the yield that we're getting from our farms, which at the moment, are not able to support the family at the level that they used to. So how can we come alongside to help them with these income generating activities that they're already doing on a small scale, some of them want to scale up what they're already doing, like reselling rice or reset, stocking them for emergencies, and then reselling them at a higher price is some of the income generating activities that I've seen selling animals, getting more animals so that they can sell them. And sometimes people may not understand why a farmer needs to get creative, outside of the norm of just farming. Because the realities of climate changes is I can no longer depend on just the farm. I need to supplement it with something else to provide for my family. I think that's what I would like people to understand is that farmers are getting creative. And if it

makes sense, why why not come alongside them to support these efforts that they're trying to make to be independent, and do something for themselves and for their families?

Christy Kauffman

Yeah, I know one of the common default income-generating activities is producing charcoal in the dry season, which is not an exciting thing to see, because that often causes forest fires and which is that also causes issues to the environment. When you look up into the mountain side, and it's peppered with bits of fire, It's not exactly a good thing.

Naomi Dociliat

Yeah, so as we educate them on these income generating activities, we can promote certain ones and explain them why other ones may be detrimental to their health in their family and their community and environment. So, I think it's a balance. That's why for one of our other partners, we've been training them on how to run a business, what type of businesses would be most valuable for your community, assess what's needed in your area, what's already, what's not there, and then coming with that business for the area. So that's one of the focus we have for one of our projects, which is in the north, and the L'Artibonite area.

Rony Janvier

Yeah, I was. I was thinking to, to your comment, yeah, in the way Naomi responded to it. Yeah. And I figured out that it is really a balance, because anything you do there is pros and cons. Even the reforestation project, there is pros and cons, as well. There are some seeds you can plant that can destroy, or that can go against the community that against the environment, even though for a certain project, at the first when you look at it, and the first time you can see it's good thing for the environment. Good. You know, there is pros and cons, as soon as you can educate, and we do need alternatives in terms of climate change, we can't really just get stuck on on the agricultural, even though we weren't gonna ask the farmers to not farm again. But they do need alternatives. They do need income generating things to do in terms of like, as we're during the [Hurricane] Matthew, when Matthew happened, many farmers lost completely their gardens and how they will recover, if they did not have something else. And they did. And which can be an alternative to have them recover, they will just stay and stay for a project to come in the community stay, to stay for the government to come with something or safe or to demand for food and so on. And you can see in the community where people have other alternative, they recover very fast than other community when they don't have other alternative is the reason why we really encourage the communities to think about other alternative and do not getting stuck on only one thing. And if something happened and you lost everything, and you restart like from zero.

Naomi Dociliat 33:41

Yeah, I think we just have to continue to listen, to assess. And then to make an informed decision from what we've gathered, not wait till not say, Oh, we already did something a year ago, because everything's constantly changing. So we need to just reassess the situation and just see if what we're currently doing is meeting the need that we say we're trying to meet. And if it's not to adjust, to not be hesitant to make the necessary changes for the success of both

the program and for the participants. Because what we want is to improve the lives of those we say we're we're working with, we're trying to impact. And you can only do that if you're aware of their current realities, and implementing something that will work alongside where they're at to help them to get to the next level. Because we get for example, we can have all these great inputs that we've purchased because the project says to purchase all these inputs, but what good is planting all those inputs if all the gardens have been washed away?

Christy Kauffman
inputs being...?

Naomi Docilait

Being seeds. So what that is all those seeds that we've just purchased if their gardens have been washed away, and it has to, it takes a while to get it back to the state where you can plant again. So it's not just to be like, oh this is horrible in the narrative. And then you don't talk to the partner to see, to hear their stressors to see what they've been going through and to see what strategies they've come up with and to see if that aligns with where we're trying to go with our strategic plan here at MCC Haiti. So just sitting down with a partner, listening to their worries, their concerns and what they think is going to work, and then we're giving them feedback. Did you consider this? Did you try this? What if worst case scenario, what's your plan then? So that way that we've already got them thinking about plan B, plan C. So it's not a surprise to anyone by the time we get to the end of year two. So that's my takeaway from all of this is just to plan with your partners on an ongoing basis, because the reality here in Haiti is constantly changing from month to month.

Christy Narration:

The constant changes in the country mean constant reevaluating of the situation. As security in the country changes, as natural disasters hit, as climate change continues to significantly change important factors like rainfall and temperature, MCC will continue to make plans with partners in finding creative solutions in their communities and Lord-willing, those plans will come to fruition but if they don't, our team in Haiti is more than used to adapting and changing plans.

That's it for this episode. Thank you to Naomi Docilait and Rony Janvier for speaking with me.

If you know someone who has a connection with Haiti or who might be interested in hearing about some of the current challenges of that context, consider sharing this episode with them.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced on the traditional land of the Anacostia and Piscataway.

This episode was produced by me, Christy Kauffman and Meghan Mast. And the head producer is Emily Loewen.

In our next episode we will be talking about climate change with preacher Dr. Siboniso Ncube. We are excited to hear from her about the connection between faith and climate action as peacebuilding. And she is a poet with her words so you won't want to miss it.

A lot is happening in the world right now. It is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ

Thanks and take good care.